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Sarothrura crakes in Ethiopia

by J. S. Ash

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Of the 9 species of *Sarothrura* crakes, a genus confined to the African continent and Madagascar, 3 are known from Ethiopia. At the time when Keith *et al.* (1970) completed the monograph on the genus, with data up to the end of 1968, there were only single records of 2 of the 3 species, but several for the third. More information has since accrued, and the present knowledge of their occurrence or absence in Ethiopia is given below. The order and nomenclature of Urban & Brown (1971) is followed, although more recently Ripley (1977) has placed all the *Sarothrura* crakes in the genus *Coturnicops*, in which Selater (1930) placed *ayresi*.

SAROTHRURA AYRESI White-winged Crake

In the Republic of South Africa known only from single birds at 3 localities and from about 30 specimens in 4 localities in Ethiopia (the locality given as Entotto is a ridge of wooded hills, and almost certainly Sululta, which Entotto overlooks, is intended) (Keith *et al.*). The last certain records from South Africa were in 1901, where Keith *et al.* conjectured it had by then become extinct, and from Ethiopia in 1949. Keith *et al.* refer to an Ethiopian specimen with fully developed eggs on 18 July, and to an unfledged young bird on 22 September, so there can be no doubt that the species bred in this country. Firsthand references to the occurrences of this species in Ethiopia are in Bannerman (1911), Gajdacs & Keve (1968), Guichard (1948, 1950). Urban & Brown call it resident and a possible intra-African migrant in the west and southwest highlands by streams and marshes, with breeding possibly occurring June-September.

There are no new data since Keith *et al.* From 1970 to 1976, I made many searches for this species at Gefersa and Sululta, in each year, at various times from July to October, and several other observers, including C. Erard (1974), Stuart Keith, Dr. Clark Olson, and Dr. S. J. Tyler, did the same, on occasions using dogs and up to 30 local beaters, without finding a trace of a bird. Many people visit Sululta to shoot Great Snipe *Gallinago media* and those questioned had no knowledge of these crakes. Similarly many local shepherd boys who tend their animals daily in this area were unaware of the bird. The marsh at Gefersa is now much reduced following the construction of a reservoir at the site, but Sululta marshes have probably remained unchanged in the past 30 years. There is always a chance that the species may be found again in the numerous other highland marshes in Ethiopia, but I have searched many without success, so that there is a distinct possibility that the species may be extinct in Africa.

SAROTHRURA RUFA Red-chested Crake

Widespread in Africa south of about 4° N, but very few north of this line (Keith *et al.*), and only one from Ethiopia (Guichard 1950). Urban & Brown describe the resident race *S. r. elizabethae* as rare in larger fresh-water lakes and rivers, and perhaps other grassy or marshy areas, in the west highlands (Gefersa). There are no breeding records.

Since 1970 there have been more records from 4 localities in Ethiopia. Two of these are noted with caution by Erard (1974), but in my opinion and that of Stuart Keith (*in litt.*), they are acceptable as undoubted *S. rufa*. All known records are listed below.

Locality	Alt. (m)	Date	Numbers	Authority
Gefersa, Shoa	2600	30 July 1947	1♀	Guichard 1950
Challa, Kaffa	1970	5-9 May 1971	several	Desfayes 1975
Gimbi (3 km E), Wollega	1850	28 Sept. 1971	1	Erard 1974
Didessa (6 km W), Wollega	1240	1 Oct. 1971	1	Erard 1974
Jimma airport, Kaffa	1700	24 June 1974	1	Keith (<i>in litt.</i>)
Didessa, Wollega	1262	1970-1976	several	Ash

The bird heard by Keith near Jimma was calling in the marshes at the airport; those seen by Desfayes were in very wet marshes at Challa.

After hearing Keith's tapes of their calls from elsewhere, I realized that I had heard *S. rufa* on many occasions in small marshes adjoining my regular campsite at Didessa, without recognizing at the time that they were those of a bird. I had been led to believe by the local people that it was a species of toad or frog, but Dr. M. L. Largen assures me that no anuran species known to him in Ethiopia or elsewhere calls in this manner.

SAROTHRURA ELEGANS Buff-spotted Crake

Range rather similar to that of *S. rufa* (Keith *et al.*) and only one record from Ethiopia (Benson 1974). Urban & Brown describe the resident race *S. e. elegans* as rare and found in the southeast highlands and south Ethiopia in Juniper-Podocarpus forest at 2400-3200 m.

Since 1970 there have been records from 4 more localities in southern Ethiopia, suggesting that the bird is locally, but widely and not uncommonly, distributed there. All known records are summarized overleaf.

Locality	Alt. (m)	Date	Numbers	Authority
Mega, Sidamo	?	4 June 1941	1	Benson 1947
Koffole, Arussi	2200	14 June 1968	1	Roux & Benson (1969)
Agaro, Kaffa	1670	June 1968	several	Erard 1974
Bulcha, Sidamo	1270	1970-1976	many	Ash
Belleta forest, Kaffa	2000	24 June 1974	1	Keith (<i>in litt.</i>)

Erard's 1968 birds near Agaro were claimed by him with reserve, but as he was familiar with the species' call in Gabon, and they resembled those of recordings of the species, his records are acceptable. In this area the birds were in forests of *Ficus sp.* Keith's bird near Jimma was in a thick bushy ravine in an area of mixed forest lacking *Podocarpus* and *Juniperus* but stated by him to be typical habitat.

At Bulcha I was familiar with the birds' calls for several years before identifying their origin. The local people believed them to be the calls of a tortoise, although several identified them as being the "King of Birds—a kind of nocturnal bird of prey which hunted from a low branch close to the ground". On hearing Keith's tape of *S. elegans* in 1974, I instantly recognized the identity of the unknown caller. Unfortunately, I do not have any notes on it prior to its identification, nor did I ever see one in the course of weeks of observation in areas where it was apparently fairly common. Birds mostly called at night and only very occasionally during the day; in June 1974 they were particularly numerous and on one night I was able to pinpoint at least 10 calling round the camp. It was possible to approach within 1-2 metres of birds calling in dense ground cover, to see the vegetation disturbed as the birds moved, and yet still not be able to see them. Calling, apparently from individual birds, continued for hours, a drawn out mournful "wooooooo" lasting for 3 seconds at intervals of 6-7 seconds. At very close range presumed contact calls were heard between birds, sometimes literally at one's feet, a soft and short "moo" (occasionally a quick "moo-moo-moo") (from the male?), answered by an equally soft but rather longer and often quavering "mair" (from the female?).

The Bulcha habitat was forest edge and open canopy forest with dense ground cover along a riverside.

In conclusion, of the 3 *Sarothrura* crakes known from Ethiopia, all have been considered rare and local. New records for *S. elegans* and *S. rufa* indicate they are more widespread than was previously thought, but *S. ayresi* has not been seen for nearly 30 years in spite of many searches in previously favoured localities.

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Appendix: Gazetteer of localities mentioned in the text.

Agaro, 7° 50' N, 36° 38' E; Belleta Forest, 7° 32' N, 36° 33' E; Bulcha, 6° 27' N, 38° 11' E; Challala, 7° 46' N, 36° 22' E; Didessa, 9° 02' N, 36° 09' E; Didessa (6 km W), 9° 04' N, 36° 05' E; Entotto, 9° 05' N, 38° 45' E; Gefersa, 9° 03' N, 38° 40' E; Gimbi (3 km E),

9° 12' N, 35° 50' E; Jimma airport, 7° 34' N, 36° 48' E; Koffole, 7° 05' N, 38° 45' E; Mega, 4° 05' N, 38° 19' E; Sululta, 9° 11' N, 38° 45' E.

Postscript: Whilst the paper on *Sarothrura ayresi* was in press, Mr. A. D. Forbes-Watson drew my attention to a 1976 paper by S. W. Wolff & P. le S. Milstein (Bokmakierie 28: 33-36), describing the re-discovery of *Sarothrura ayresi* in South Africa.

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A Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus griseldis* in Mozambique

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The Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus griseldis* does not seem to have been recorded from Mozambique. It is therefore noteworthy that a migrant (wing 77 mm, weight 12.0 g at 0700) ringed with a British Trust for Ornithology ring (JS 33684) on 19 September 1975 at Koka (08° 27' N, 39° 06' E), Shoa Province, Ethiopia, was found dead at Chire (16° 42' S, 35° 20' E), Morrumbala District (Zambézia), Mozambique. The ring was reported on 1 February 1977, but the actual date of its recovery is not known.

The Basra Reed Warbler is such a distinctive race that some authorities have accorded it full specific status (Ticehurst 1922, Slater 1930, Voous 1960, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1960, Pearson & Backhurst 1976), whilst others regard it as a race of *A. arundinaceus* (Stresemann & Arnold 1949, Vaurie 1959, White 1960, Williamson 1968). I am inclined to agree with the former, but a final decision must rest on detailed field studies with particular emphasis on its song patterns.

Its winter quarters are stated by Moreau (1971) as "from Kenya to Malawi", by Vaurie (1959) as "East Africa from Kenya south to Nyasaland",